

Australian Water Stories

a) Aboriginal Dreaming Stories

Focus

Since time began, people have been fascinated with the origins of our Earth and its elements. Myths, legends and stories often inform us and open windows on fabulous far-away worlds and their beliefs and customs. Using a story from the selection below, allow students to listen to, discuss and make connections between how it explores water's origin and future.

Procedure

- Find a myth, story or Dreaming story about water; listen to and discuss the propositions about water's origin and future.
- Encourage students to make a collage of significant events and stages in water's cycle from the tales/stories they've been introduced to.
- Talk about storytelling as one way many cultures use to pass on information to younger generations. Recount any stories that involve water that might have been passed on by family or friends.
- Use the local library or school resource centre to find other folk tales, myths or legends that contain explanations for how water came to be; eg why the sea is salty.
- Retell or act out stories or legends found about the origins of water.
- Predict future experiences for water in stories or pictures.

Resources

The following are suitable titles:

- Tiddalick the frog, S. Nunes
- Rainbow serpent, D. Roughsey
- Earth songs, M. C. Livingston & L. E. Fisher
- Sun, moon and water (from Nigeria) in Earth air, fire and water, J. Heslewood
- The Water Spirit in Japanese tales, R. Tyler

EXTENSION

Stories from the Dreaming:

Most aboriginal people have a very close relationship with the land, especially the land to which they belong. The land provides a link between the people and the Dreaming.

- Read the Dreaming stories (following pages)
 - The river which was made from tears
 - How the Murray River was made
 - The creation of the Narran Lakes
 - How the water got to the plains
- Explore the ideas in the stories through questions that follow each story and your own questions.

The river which was made from tears

Once there lived a great hunter who found a giant brolga with a broken wing. At first the hunter felt frightened and tried to run away, but then he felt sorry for the brolga so he went up to the brolga and asked kindly how the wing was broken.

The brolga told the hunter his story and as he did so great tears fell from the brolga's large sad eyes. The tears fell into the tracks he had made while he crawled along in pain, and each tear was as big as the water of a billabong. They turned into fresh cool water and formed a river, flowing very fast along the brolga's tracks.

After he had told his story, the poor brolga died of sorrow and woe and the hunter rose into the sky and became the Morning Star, where he watches over the poor brolga.

The river, which was made from the brolga's tears, is called the Giddy River today and is not far from Yirrkala in the Northern Territory.

As told by Irene Lama-Lama.

Source: 'Kwork Kwork the Green Frog and other tales from the Spirit Time'. 1977. Australian National University Press, Canberra.

How the Murray River was made

Long before the Murray River became a torrent of refreshing, life giving water, an earthquake shook the barren land and formed a long trench or chasm. Occasional rain swept across the land, and a tiny stream flowed down the newly formed chasm.

Then came another tremor, which caused the hills to shake, and the land to dance as though a corroboree was being held far under the earth. Rocks and soil heaved, and from the bowels of the earth an enormous fish shouldered its way to the surface. It was borne on the crest of a wave of water. The sun sparkled on the river torrent, which boiled and eddied in the trench, following the trail of the fish, which swam down the stream.

It was far too large for the narrow bed. It dug its head into the earth and scooped it up on either side, widening its path with the stroke of its powerful tail. The water filled the hollows made by the head and the tail of the fish, and behind it the broad stream flowed gently with many turns and bends as the agitated water subsided. So the bulldozer of ancient days excavated the bed of the Murray River and filled it with water as far as Lake Alexandrina.

Source: A. W. Reed, 'Aboriginal Fables and Legendary Tales'. 1967. Halstead Press, Sydney

The Creation of the Narran Lakes

The Aboriginal Dreaming story of the creation of Narran Lake begins when Baiame (the Great Spirit father) and his two wives Birrahgnooloo and Cunnunbeillee were out hunting and gathering food. While waiting for Baiame to return from his hunting, his wives made camp at a spring, which led to the Narran River. Tired after making a shelter, the women took off their string skirts and plunged into the spring's clear water.

They were immediately grabbed and swallowed up by two giant crocodiles called Kurreahs, who lived in the spring. As the Kurreahs swam down the Narran River, the spring and the river dried up as they went.

When Baiame returned to camp and found his wives' skirts by the spring, he guessed what had happened. Angry, he pursued the Kurreahs from one dried-up waterhole to the next along the Narran River. By making short-cuts across the bends, he was able to meet the Kurreahs head-on. As he speared them, the Kurreahs lashed their mighty tails from side to side. As they did this, a large hollow formed in the mud.

Cutting open the Kurreahs with his woggarah, Baiame rescued his wives and placed them on an ant bed where they eventually revived. Baiame warned his wives never to swim in the waterholes of the Narran River. The hollow, which the Kurreahs formed with their tails, fills with water every flood time to become Narran Lake.

NOTE: Narran Lake is a wildlife sanctuary where pelicans, black swans, ducks and many other wildfowl come when the lake is full of water. Today there are no crocodiles in the lake. It is thought, however, that crocodiles would have lived in the Narran Lake area around the time of the last Ice Age. The Dreaming story may have its beginnings in this time.

After listening to the story try to answer the following questions:

- Q According to the Dreaming story, how was Narran Lake formed?
- Q Why might Aboriginal groups want to protect Narran Lake?
- Q Find Narran Lake on a map of New South Wales. Describe where Narran Lake is found? How many kilometres is the lake from the nearest town?
- Q Using the map scale, how big is Narran Lake?
- Q How does it connect to other places? Is it part of a river system?
- Q What might the scenery be like? Why?
- Q What animals might like to live in Narran Lake?
- Q What would it be like to live near Narran Lake? Would you like to live near a lake? Why?
- Q Is there any evidence that this place might be changing? In what way?

Suggested references:

http://www.fisheries.nsw.gov.au/aquatic_habitats/aquatic_habitats/wetlands_and_floodplains

<http://www.wetlandcare.com.au/Content/anmviewer.asp?a=366&print=yes%94>

http://www.wetlandcare.com.au/education_schools_archive.asp

How the water got to the plains

Way, way back in the first time, when everything was new, there was a group of Aboriginal people living on a mountain. It was a lovely place, but everyone was worried. It had not rained for a long, long time and they were very short of water. They had some wells but these, except for one, were empty. When it had rained before, the water had just run down the side of the mountain, into the sea, which was far, far away. Now, on the other side of the mountain, there were just some big, dry plains where nothing grew.

Weeri and Walawidbit were two greedy men. They decided to steal the last of the water for themselves and then run away. In secret, they made a large water-carrier, which was called an eel-a-mun. When everyone was asleep, they stole the water from the last well and hurried off.

When the people woke up, there was no water for them. This was very bad, because there were little children and babies needing water and also the old people. And also, it was very hot.

The Elders called all the people together and it was then that they saw that two men were missing.

Looking around, they found the tracks of the two men. Quickly, the warriors followed these tracks, which led down the other side of the mountain to the big plains and they could see the men in the distance.

The water-carrier was very heavy and Weeri and Walawidbit were walking slowly. This was because they thought they were safe. However, when they saw the warriors coming they ran, too.

The best spearmen in the group ran to a cliff that jutted out and threw all the spears they had. One hit the eel-a-mun and dropped off. However, it did make a hole in the water-carrier. On and on across the plains ran the two men. They did not notice that the water was leaking out until the carrier was almost empty. This was why they had been able to run faster and by this time, the warriors had caught up.

Now, this was way back in the first time, when very strange things happened. So the warriors took the men back home and the Elders called a big meeting. It was decided that the two men had to be punished for stealing and also, for thinking of themselves first and not the community. So the Wonmutta, the clever man, made some very strong magic and Weeri was changed into the very first emu. He went running down the mountain, out onto the plains, in shame. Walawidbit was changed into the very first blue-tongued lizard and he crawled away to hide in the rocks.

But, a wonderful thing had happened. Wherever the water had leaked onto the plains, there were now beautiful billabongs, or waterholes. There was grass and flowers and lovely water lilies and then there were shrubs and trees. And soon, the birds came and everyone was happy because there was enough water for everyone. And that is how the water got to the plains.

told by Olga Miller

Q What things do you think the Elders were teaching the people through this story?

Glossary

There are about two hundred and fifty Australian languages, although most are no longer spoken and few are in active use. This is a list of the indigenous words used by this storyteller. Spellings vary from place to place. The storytellers and their communities have supplied the spellings used here.

Word	Meaning
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Butchulla/Badjula	—	Aboriginal people of Fraser Island, Queensland
Wynnum	—	Pandanus palm
Eel-a-mun	—	Water-carrier
Wonmutta	—	Clever man; sorcerer
Billabong	—	Waterhole that fills up only in the rainy season